



# Using the past to build the future

December 12, 2018

Historically speaking, the Laboratory is a behemoth. From Manhattan to Mars, more than seven decades of innovation on “the Hill” have literally carried mankind to new heights. For some, the sheer breadth of that timetable can be difficult to digest, but for Laboratory historian Alan Carr it’s the perfect challenge — one that brings new discoveries every day.

“Our world-changing institution has captured the imagination of people around the world since our existence became publicly known,” Carr says. “The reason we at Los Alamos are perennially in the spotlight is because of our history.”

Over the years, Carr’s job has evolved from behind-the-scenes documentarian to Lab spokesman, in which he regularly (and enthusiastically) doles out historical factoids and guided tours for visiting international dignitaries, Academy Award winners, Nobel laureates and U.S. senators. He also fields informational requests from the broader community including media, filmmakers and students.

## History in the making

Armed with a background in Russian history and a self-proclaimed soft spot for World War II-era books, movies and memorabilia, Carr’s career in Los Alamos started in earnest in a small office overlooking a loading dock in the Lab’s old records center.

Interestingly, learning the Lab’s past in those early days established a keen interest in its present and future — a driving force behind Carr’s continued dedication to his work.

“Many people assume we continually dwell on the past in the archives, but that’s far from true,” he says. “When we identify records for preservation, we’re thinking ahead. What might be useful for the technical staff five, 10 or 50 years into the future?”

With that in mind, Carr often finds it remarkable how, historically and today, Lab programs seem to perpetually generate new insights and spinoffs into other scientific areas, creating a sort of natural forward trajectory.

For example, Carr pointed out that the cessation of underground nuclear testing in 1992 propelled the Lab’s computer simulation program — which started in 1952 with the invention of MANIAC I — onward in new and exciting ways in the pursuit of science-based stockpile stewardship. Such supercomputing has since helped enable things like vaccine development and climate modeling.

“For 15 years I’ve been reading about the achievements of the past and present, and yet there is always something new and exciting to learn,” Carr says.

Looking ahead, Carr doesn't think he'll ever run out of history to preserve and showcase.

"The best thing about being the Los Alamos historian is the hugely diverse set of people I get to know," he says. "Almost every day I meet a new person, learn a new factoid, enjoy a new adventure and get paid to do it."

>Learn more about Alan Carr in his [recent article](#) for the Laboratory science magazine 1663.

**Los Alamos National Laboratory**

**[www.lanl.gov](http://www.lanl.gov)**

**(505) 667-7000**

**Los Alamos, NM**

Managed by Triad National Security, LLC for the U.S Department of Energy's NNSA

